

Central Intelligence Agency



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The Non-Communist Factions in Cambodia:
The Challenges Ahead

Summary

Although many issues, including power-sharing arrangements, are unresolved in Cambodia, the framework of a political settlement is emerging. This development is raising new concerns about the ability of the non-Communist Sihanoukist National Army (ANS) and Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) resistance factions to cope with what would be a new era in Cambodia. In our view, it is not too early to begin assessing the strengths and weakness of each faction and speculating about the challenges they may face in the difficult transition that is on the horizon.

If there is an international agreement that produces a coalition government in Phnom Penh, the challenge for the two non-Communist factions would be to secure and preserve their place in the new regime. Their primary assets are their association with Prince Sihanouk and the

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international credibility and domestic popularity that flow from it. Probably the best prospect for the non-Communists is an accommodation with the stronger People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and possibly elements of the Khmer Rouge, along with international guarantees. [REDACTED]

By most measures, Prince Sihanouk's National Army has clear political and military advantages over the often self-destructive KPNLF. Nevertheless, both organizations are fragile, in our view, and no match militarily--and probably not politically--for the Communist Khmer Rouge or the incumbent PRK regime. [REDACTED]

The non-Communists' survival most likely will depend on political acumen and strong leadership, which, aside from Sihanouk's legendary talents, are scarce. [REDACTED]

A Perspective on the Process

The broad outlines of a Cambodia settlement are taking shape, and it is difficult to predict where all the parties will end up if one is reached. The dynamics are complex with China, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Thailand, the other ASEAN countries, the three resistance factions, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, [REDACTED]

What is clear is that Cambodia will be highly unstable in the aftermath of a political settlement and fraught with risks and uncertainties for all the Khmer factions, especially the non-Communists. If the diplomatic process continues on its present course, even an internationally sanctioned agreement will not guarantee them a continuing role in government. Negotiators are haggling over the formula for a provisional entity, but so far have not focused on establishing a process for the transition to a permanent government or crafted any ground rules to shape the result. The various settlement proposals make only vague reference to eventual elections, for which there are no strong traditions or established institutions in Cambodia. [REDACTED]

The Non-Communists' Balance Sheet: Assets...

The primary strength of the non-Communists is their political credibility. Unlike their Communist Khmer Rouge counterparts and Vietnam's client People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime, the non-Communists are not tainted by past excesses or collaboration with a hated enemy. Memories of the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in the late 1970s probably are the most serious impediment to that group's quest for sole power in Cambodia. For its part, the PRK's decadelong drive to win favor with the Cambodian populace has been stunted by its image as a Vietnamese puppet. The non-Communist factions, on the other hand, have international political legitimacy that accords the resistance movement stature it otherwise would not have. We believe their relatively stronger public image would improve their chances for generating appeal inside Cambodia when they join a new government there. [REDACTED]

Much of the non-Communists' appeal derives from their association with the highly popular Prince Sihanouk. Their overall position is strengthened, in our view, by the consensus among all parties to the conflict that Sihanouk is necessary for a political solution and future government in Cambodia. The non-Communists, particularly Sihanouk's own group, thus probably will have an advocate presiding over a new regime in Phnom Penh. [REDACTED]

Because of the non-Communists' residual popularity, political credibility, and links to Sihanouk, we believe the PRK will see utility in keeping them on board after a settlement. The PRK has already showed interest in joining forces with them to strengthen military and political defenses against the Khmer Rouge--a security threat officials in Phnom Penh acknowledge will remain indefinitely. They also probably calculate that the prospects for substantial international assistance will be best if Sihanouk returns to Phnom Penh and the non-Communists participate in a new government. [REDACTED]

The Khmer Rouge has reasons of its own to cooperate politically with the non-Communists, at least for now. The organization has sought refuge under the non-Communists' political umbrella and probably will try to do so after a settlement, at least early on. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Khmer Rouge reconciliation with Prince Sihanouk late last year and endorsement of his peace plan, which required the Khmer Rouge to drop opposition to international peacekeeping forces, probably were steps in that direction. [REDACTED]

The two non-Communist factions are also making some headway in developing their military forces. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Both factions have taken advantage of the increased manpower and support to step up military operations inside Cambodia, though mostly in areas near the Thai-Cambodian border. [REDACTED]

... and Liabilities

The KPNLF has been nearly paralyzed for several years by chronic infighting and poor morale that render it the weaker of the non-Communist factions. Many Front officials routinely sacrifice the organization's interests for their own, and we believe they will continue to do so after a settlement. They have already squandered much of the domestic political capital and international appeal derived from their cause. [REDACTED]

Although the Sihanoukists shine in comparison to the Front, [REDACTED] They are hindered by a number of long-standing deficiencies in command and control, logistics, leadership talent, and cohesion. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Taken together, the two non-Communist factions have not benefited from cooperation. [REDACTED] Shared concerns and interests may improve teamwork somewhat as the two groups try to cope with the problems and uncertainties of the transition ahead. [REDACTED]

Longer Run Challenges

[REDACTED] Incumbency gives the PRK an advantage in its dealings with the non-Communists; although PRK government structures are embryonic, the regime is strengthening its presence throughout most of the country. In the international arena, the PRK is gaining stature by shedding its close association with Vietnam and by advertising its role as primary opponent of the outcast Khmer Rouge. Moreover, any value the PRK places on cooperation with the non-Communists probably is related more to Phnom Penh's desire to stack the political deck against the Khmer Rouge than to having the non-Communists as anti-Khmer Rouge allies on the battlefield. The PRK's use for the non-Communists probably would decline if Sihanouk dies. Any perceived lessening of the Khmer Rouge threat also would reduce the value of cooperating with the non-Communists. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Khmer Rouge already is stronger than the non-Communists inside Cambodia because of the large numbers of troops it has there, the numerous caches of combat materiel at its disposal. [REDACTED] As it is, the Khmer Rouge guerrillas often resort to harassment, intimidation, and armed attacks against the non-Communists despite the acknowledged need for partnership with them. This heavyhanded approach contradicts the organization's claims to rehabilitation. [REDACTED]